

**CITY OF TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND  
(ADOPTED 1/10/05)**

**BUDGET WORKSESSION  
OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

**Thursday, May 6, 2004**

**OFFICIALS PRESENT:**

Mayor Porter

Councilmember Austin-Lane

Councilmember Barry

Councilmember Elrich

Councilmember Mizeur

Councilmember Seamens

Councilmember Williams

City Manager Finn

Assistant City Clerk Carpenter

ECD Director Daines

Library Director Arnold-Robbins

The City Council convened at 7:34 p.m. in the Council Chambers of the Municipal Building, 7500 Maple Avenue, Takoma Park, Maryland.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Beverly Tucker Griffin, 7520 Maple Avenue, expressed her concern about young people hanging out around the neighborhood, engaging in possible drug trafficking. They are approaching cars. The Police were around yesterday and shots were fired. There is no safe haven in this area. Kids don't have a safe haven to do what they need to do. She was told that the Community Center project would have a gym. The kids need somewhere to go, maybe they can't afford after school programs. She went to Piney Branch Elementary School and Takoma Park Middle School, and there heard about serious problems with youth behavior. You are our voice, we need your help. My windshield got hit with a rock the other day. Kids don't have anything else to do. It was a frightening experience. There are young teenage boys with nothing to do. Any time of the day, there are things going on outside this building. I understand the Police have a rapport with these boys.

Ms. Porter said, the Police attempt to build trust and rapport. The Community Center will have a game room and a teen room. The rooms will be supervised. I agree with your concerns. We hope to have more resources for them very soon. You might speak with our recreation director. A lot of the free or less expensive things are at the New Hampshire Avenue center.

Mr. Seamens thanked Ms. Griffin for her interest in the community. The Community Center is probably six months away. We do have some recreation programs that might be of interest to them. The Council is moving into the budget cycle, and we are hopefully embracing drug law enforcement in the next year.

Ms. Porter announced that she had to leave the meeting briefly to attend the City Manager Selection Committee meeting. Mayor Pro Tem Williams assumed the chair at 7:42 p.m. He noted that the scheduled closed session has been removed from the agenda for this evening.

## **BUDGET WORKSESSION**

### **1. Presentation of Potential Savings and Corresponding Reductions in Services**

#### **Economic and Community Development**

Ms. Daines commented, our services are non-essential and many duplicate those provided by Montgomery County. I tried to identify huge swaths of potential savings, grouped by general areas. Ms. Daines presented the information.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked, what are the revenues from rental housing license fees?

Ms. Daines reported, \$175,000.

Mr. Seamens asked for the revenue from inspection fees?

Ms. Daines said, \$40,000 plus.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked for clarification on emergency services for evictions. Don't we contract with Adventist Social Services?

Ms. Daines said, we lease storage space for displaced tenants for a defined period of time. This is not included in the services provided by Adventist Social Services. They provide temporary housing, funded through the voluntary contribution when people pay their stormwater fees.

Mr. Finn said, we had a resident ask the Council to look at the problem of evictions. I investigated and found that this was something we could do on an interim basis.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked if Adventist Social Services could do this as well?

Ms. Daines continued the presentation. Landlord and Tenant hours could be reduced, but Montgomery County has a large population to work with. We provide a lot of personal service. Because of duplication across the board in the Landlord Tenant office, we could transfer all of those to Montgomery County. This would require rescinding a number of our laws. A little under \$200,000 could be saved. There could be \$53,000 - \$58,000 savings per year in legal services. We don't receive a rebate for these services.

With regard to staffing cutbacks, Ms. Daines reviewed projects that could be cut, including pedestrian safety proposals, SHA interaction and interaction with transportation services. This could limit our efforts to our ability to proactively respond to issues that come up.

With regard to the Memorandum of Understanding with Montgomery County on the development review process, we could just have all local review done by Park and Planning. This would limit our ability to influence designs. We could discontinue the business survival guide which costs \$8,000 for translation and publication services. Staff could stop attending business association meetings, and Council committee meetings.

[Ms. Porter returned at 7:58.]

Ms. Daines continued, the City could discontinue the practice of attending neighborhood association meetings, reduce efforts to work with the enterprise zone. We've already scaled back on GIS. Former employee Ron Vaughan worked with GIS, on redistricting

With respect to grants administration, we could turn Community Development Block Grants control over to Montgomery County. Program Open Space funds could also be transferred. The cost of administering the program is quite high. The last item, discontinuing grant finder service, would save the \$7,000 budgeted.

On affordable housing activity, we could discontinue the participation in the affordable housing fair.

Our capacity building project has been well received and is very successful.

With respect to revenue, we could streamline the process for violation notices. The violation notification and abatement period is not required by the ordinance. But reducing it could have a negative public relations impact. We could increase the rental housing license fees.

Mr. Williams asked, are there no rebates from the County for anything in HCD? Even though the services are duplicated?

Mr. Finn said we used to get rebates for inspections, but it is now on a fee basis and we lost the claim to that.

Mr. Williams suggested we pursue the claim to rebates. It looks like all other jurisdictions have a sliding scale or a dual scale. Ours is only a single fee?

Ms. Daines said, in apartment buildings, there is a quick turnaround time; it doesn't take long to inspect. Inspection is more involved with single family homes. The ranges reflect that. A challenge we have is that we don't make a distinction based on number of units, we differentiate by quality (through the bi-annual inspection process).

Mr. Williams observed, half of the units got monitoring one year, half got monitoring the next year.

Ms. Daines confirmed, yes, that's how we would structure it to ensure continuity. It is a very

time consuming process.

Mr. Seamens asked how much in grant money do we get, how much do we get through these services?

Ms. Austin-Lane asked, how is it that you think the City would access some of the services provided by the County? Pedestrian safety services, in some cases, are only for County controlled roads? What would you propose?

Ms. Daines clarified, by not providing the service (for example pedestrian safety, not a mandatory service) we would informally fall into the queue with the County. Maple Avenue, for example, would have to get in line with all the other roads.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked, what about City or State roads? The County was offering a pretty high level of service, we didn't take them up on it.

[Councilmember Elrich arrived at 8:13 p.m.]

Ms. Austin-Lane asked about using outside vendors for GIS support.

Ms. Daines said, I have not priced an outside vendor. Some services can be provided by Park and Planning. John Brill, for example, who generates maps for C-SAFE., would have to get the assistance elsewhere.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked, what about the COLTA \$195,000? Would this mean dismantling rent stabilization?

Ms. Daines said, if we transfer services to Montgomery County, the Landlord Tenant program, COLTA, and Rent Stabilization would have to be dismantled. The County would take over Landlord Tenant, but would not enforce rent stabilization laws.

Ms. Austin-Lane commented that we deal with that is not related to rent stabilization.

Ms. Daines said we have one full-time employee deals with rent stabilization.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked her to address where we could increase fees to \$90, to cover the capital improvement petition.

Ms. Daines said, that could be an option. That's an average cost we incur, for a construction management consultant, the cost of rents analyst, and the cost of an attorney or a COLTA executive director. That \$90 per unit would offset the costs, but not the staffing costs. If you increase landlord cost, you would have to consider permitting the landlord to pass the increase on to tenants.

Ms. Austin-Lane asked what role does COLTA have?

Ms. Daines said an attorney reviews it their decision. It is not a rubber stamp.

Ms. Porter said, with rental housing licensing fees, we have a contract with the County. The rationale for the fee was to cover the cost of doing inspections. We should be able to see what it costs. Whatever we see as the costs, that should be the fee we charge.

Ms. Daines said the \$178,000 reflects only the cost to ECD. It does not cover the expenses of the Finance Department. The ordinance sets the fee.

Ms. Porter said she is not adverse to thinking about a fee for the capital improvement petition process.

Ms. Mizeur asked about attendance at the housing fair.

Ms. Daines said during the first year, it was a good neighbor thing to do with Montgomery County. Last year, Linda Walker coordinated transportation from this area to the fair in Gaithersburg. We lobbied to move it to Silver Spring, but couldn't find a non-profit to house it.

Ms. Mizeur asked if the transportation costs are included?

Ms. Daines replied that Montgomery County picked up the cost for it.

Mr. Seamens commented that the capacity building program works well.

Ms. Daines said, we had a contract for outreach and organizing, which was discontinued. Staff recommended to continue in the spirit of the community organizers, but to focus on tenant associations that could succeed, and be able to pursue the right of first refusal. We now provide ongoing training and support, to acquire property on right of first refusal. We've gotten people very far along in the process because of the technical expertise and nature of our contractors.

Ms. Porter noted we have a goal for people to purchase their rental property. It is a way to stabilize our community without losing that population. It is a mechanism to empower moderate and low income tenants. We have a right of first refusal purchase law which was enacted 20 years ago. Before this program, when property went on the market, tenants couldn't manage to get it together to take advantage of the law.

Mr. Seamens noted that, in selling the units, we are removing them from the affordable housing stock.

## **Library**

Ms. Arnold-Robbins reported on the Library. She said the reductions pretty much go to basic

library services. You can't separate out the small discrete programs, such as activities for children, college bound students, or delivery of books to Takoma Tower. Currently, to get to a 5% reduction, you have to address basic services. We could eliminate 10 staff hours, reduce operating hours by five a week. These 10 staff hours are being used to offset the part-time library position we lost to the computer lab. The effect would be on the retired, small children, and the elderly.

We could reduce the temporary assistance budget. The temporary assistance budget is equivalent to an overtime budget. This is the part time/substitute rate. It is an effective way to fill in the gaps when people go on vacation. It allows us to maintain 53 hours per week. Reducing this might result in closing more hours.

We could reduce the purchase of adult circulating books and childrens' books. We could reduce the purchase of reference materials, in other words, purchase fewer up-to-date reference materials.

Ms. Austin-Lane said there is overwhelming support for our library to stay where it is. I hear complaints that we're so separate from the County. Is there inter-library loan?

Ms. Arnold-Robbins clarified, the County libraries participate in a reciprocal borrowing system. Our inter-library loan program is done through the Pratt Library in Baltimore. It is done by mail. When patrons request items from somewhere, we borrow through Pratt. If we were involved in reciprocal borrowing, we would have to loan materials to those who don't live in Montgomery County. We are a small library with single copies. Our collection could be drained from the City. Our materials could be returned to any library in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties. We charge \$10 for a library card to non-Montgomery County residents.

Ms. Mizeur said, I have heard some suggestions of making the library a childrens' and/or periodicals-only library? Could you figure out what that would cost?

Ms. Arnold-Robbins said she could provide those costs. She pointed out that immigrants and non-drivers would suffer.

Ms. Mizeur asked if the library could provide statistics or users to the Council?

Ms. Arnold-Robbins said there is the legal issue of confidentiality.

Ms. Porter noted the extensive and unique collection related to Takoma Park at our library.

## **General Government**

Mr. Finn noted that the suggestions for cost savings outlined under General Government are not recommendations. New Council members may not know that the reception desk is fairly new. It has been very effective. We found it was not as efficient, or as customer friendly, before the

reception desk was in place. Regarding the purchasing agent/procurement desk. This is also a new position. It is a very efficient operation. We tie into Council of Government and County contracts. It would cost us something if we lose it. Regarding lobbying the County, State, federal governments. We could reclassify the position with lesser responsibilities, and lobbying could be done by others.

Ms. Porter commented on the Community and Government Liaison position. We have spent huge amounts of time back and forth to County Council on the police rebate. We might not have received the rebate without Suzanne Ludlow's assistance.

Ms. Porter said, the reception desk is a welcoming thing. You walk into the building, looking for where to go. The receptionist provides a friendly bilingual face.

Mr. Finn said, we've had two excellent employees who are bilingual. We have had an increase in the number of Spanish speaking people who come into this building. We require a bilingual person in that position.

Ms. Austin-Lane said, I agree we need someone to help to orient visitors. I couldn't get through on the phone recently and my call went into voicemail. Is the 891-7100 line covered when the desk is unattended?

Ms. Mizeur commented, this is the most uncomfortable page. It would be helpful if Mr. Finn could include what the impact and the savings of the work he will be doing with the City from July until January. Please provide more than the savings, quantify the impact.

Mr. Finn said, it is difficult to say because it is working with the Community Center, and any other requirements of the new City Manager and the Deputy Manager.

Mr. Seamens asked if the plan was in writing.

Mr. Finn said he can put something together for Council.

### **Non-Departmental**

Mr. Finn said there is little discretion in the non-departmental budget. You can't cut insurance; there is no discretion on this. Eliminating festivals and committee funding would save \$25,250.

If you add Public Works and Police involvement in the events, it is almost \$75,000. These are very important community projects.

Regarding the homeowner tax property credit, the number was \$40,000, and it shrinks each year. We have fewer people who qualify.

Ms. Porter commented that as the property tax goes up, more will be eligible.

Ms. Porter asked, what has the public safety committee spent money on?

Mr. Finn said some of it was spent on focus groups, we have put \$5,000 in the budget for that.

Ms. Porter said, when we get to the homeowner tax rebate, I'd like to have more discussion about it. I wonder if the 15% is adequate. It applies mostly to people who have paid off their homes. She would like more data on this.

Ms. Mizeur asked, have we heard from everyone? I appreciate your having everyone go through this exercise. It's been helpful to understand what we do as a City.

Mr. Finn said, if you look at the cost of each service, you can easily tell us if you want to do more in an area or do less in an area.

Mr. Williams requested Mr. Finn to let staff know that this was a very helpful exercise.

Mr. Finn said, the General Government area was a little more difficult, we had to let people know that this was an exercise. We had to be careful how we did this. We told people ahead of time what was being discussed. In the Police Department, those positions are vacant. They do not have the same issues.

Ms. Mizeur said she was hoping for an analysis of the County versus City overlap.

Mr. Finn said he will look at that in terms of revenues, and will look at the police rebate, and at all the other rebates. You'll see how much we get and what the service costs.

Ms. Mizeur asked that he note whether the County would take over certain of the responsibilities.

Mr. Barry said that a Ward 6 resident said they saw a Takoma Park police officer on a bike. They were very happy to see it.

Mr. Finn replied, yes, they were just re-certified on bike patrol. Hopefully, we'll see more of that. We're still struggling with hiring.

**CLOSED SESSION**

Ms. Porter announced that the closed session scheduled for this evening was being postponed because the City Attorney could not be present.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Council adjourned for the evening at 9:15 p.m.